Interview with John F. Melby

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOHN F. MELBY

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: This is an interview on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies with John F. Melby, a retired Foreign Service officer. We are in Williamsburg, Virginia, at a conference of historians of diplomatic relations. This is more or less a spontaneous interview of him, of which I am taking advantage of Mr. Melby. So it is not done with a great deal of preparation! But Mr. Melby has had a very interesting career, and I do want to capture it.

I wonder if you could give me a little biographic of you, when you were born, where, how you were educated and how you then became interested in foreign affairs.

MELBY: I was born in Portland, Oregon, July 1, 1913. We lived in Portland until I was six or seven. We lived in Columbus, Ohio for two years. And then we moved to Brazil, my father being with the international YMCA.

I did all my elementary schoolwork in Rio. It was all done in Portuguese. I had to learn the language all sort of overnight. Interestingly enough, it was a girls' school I was going to. The American school in Rio had closed the day before we arrived. There wasn't anyplace else to go and this was an American mission school. But it was for Brazilian girls, and they took a half dozen boys of assorted nationalities on sort of an interim basis. I was there long

enough to get all my grade school work and actually I graduated from there. I'm one of the few living males that has actually graduated from a girls' school! [Laughter]

Then, with certain changes that were happening, particularly in the missionary field, but more particularly in the YMCA, my father came back to the States. This was just prior to the beginning of the Depression. We settled in Bloomington, Illinois, where he was general secretary of the Y there.

So I went to high school in Bloomington. And I did my college work, my undergraduate work, at Illinois Wesleyan University, which was an extraordinarily good school for those days. And then I did my graduate work at the University of Chicago, in international relations.

I guess I got my interest in foreign affairs living in Brazil, after all. There I was a foreign student at age seven. Pretty young age to start out as a foreign student. And I've never lost that interest. That's been my whole career and my life.

Q: How did you get into the Foreign Service? We're talking about in the mid-1930s.

MELBY: I came in the hard way, by examination.

Q: Three-and-a-half-day exam, or something like that?

MELBY: Five-day exam in those days. I was in the first class after the Depression.

Q: This was when?

MELBY: I took the exams in the spring of 1937. And I passed them. There were quite an accumulation of people because they hadn't been given for a number of years. I think there were some 5,000 or 6,000 of us who took them. Twenty-three of us passed the exams and were in the first class of the Foreign Service.

Q: Could you give an impression of who was in the first class? Not necessarily the names, though this would be nice. The type of person you saw as you came into the Foreign Service at this particular period of time.

MELBY: By 1937, when the Roger's Act—you know, we'd sort of gotten over the old Harvard-Yale-Princeton syndrome. There were two or three people in my class—well, come to think of it, there was only one who came from Princeton and one from Brown.

This was in the early days, and there were only two of us in that class who had our Ph.Ds. Of course, that's become fairly common now, but it wasn't then. Ray Thurston and I were the first two to get our Ph.Ds. He'd gone to Wisconsin. Fred Reinhardt from Stanford, California, his mother was the president of Mills College.

There were 23 or 24 of us. They came pretty much from all over the country. Milton Raywinkle, he was the last one to retire, came from Minneapolis.

Q: So this was a good solid cut of America, rather than being an Ivy League elite?

MELBY: Anything but Ivy League, really.

Elim O'Shaughnessy was a member. He had lived all over the world. He had trouble getting in because of his accent; a very British accent. Jack Erhardt, who was then chief of personnel, told him to go out and get a job in the middle west working in a filling station. [Laughter] Which Elim did! And he worked in this filling station for a year, and he came back and his accent hadn't changed one iota. [Laughter]

Harlan Clark came from Ohio. There were a couple from Massachusetts, but not Ivy League. I think Aaron Brown was the only Ivy League member.

Q: The training of Foreign Service officers was quite a bit different in those days. I wonder if you could describe your early experiences. You came in, you passed the exam. What did they do with you?

MELBY: The first thing they did was assign us to our probationary post, which in my case was Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, across the river from El Paso. I was there in Juarez for a year and a half.

Q: What were you doing?

MELBY: I did a little bit of everything. It was a training thing. Juarez was the supervisory consulate general for the Mexican border. But there were very few officers in there. George Shaw was the consul general. At one point, I was still a student officer, George went off on leave and left me in charge! [Laughter] Which was pretty good fun.

We did all sorts of things. I worked with the Mexican border patrol on narcotics control. I did my stint at learning what visas were all about, passports, and so on. General reporting that we did out of there, I did some of that. Political reporting, of course, George did most of it.

I enjoyed it. I thought it was a great advantage to a young vice consul to go to a post like that, rather than being assigned, as some of the others were, to Mexico City or Paris or Montreal, one of these huge offices which sound glamorous, but you get there and you get stuck in the visa office. And that's all you ever do and all you ever learn sometimes. After a year and a half, I was pretty well versed in the overall functioning of the consulate.

Q: Which is of course what the system was supposed to do. So your impression of the Foreign Service wasn't one of "Oh, my God, this isn't the glamorous diplomatic life" or something like that? This didn't bother you, did it?

MELBY: I loved every minute of it. I'd do it to this day.

Q: Then you went back to the Foreign Service School in 1938?

MELBY: Yes. Early winter of '38. It was six months.

Q: What was the training like then? Had any of your class been weeded out by that point? Or when they were in, they were in to stay?

MELBY: Yes. It was Klahr Huddle in charge of us. Cornelia Bassell was sort of the mother hen who looked after us. And what we had was really four or five months of lectures on political subjects, on area studies. Had lectures from the passport division, visas. Somebody came in from the economic section. It was largely a matter of just lectures. No examinations involved.

Q: Did you have a feeling—this was '38-'39—that the United States really wasn't one of the major powers? We were doing a lot of reporting, but we really weren't playing much of a role in a very turbulent period of time leading up to World War II?

MELBY: No, I think we thought the United States was one of the major powers of the world. I think we were quite conscious of that. Conscious of playing our role, too.

Q: What was our role? We didn't have much of a part in all the maneuvering as Hitler rose to power and leading up to the start of World War II.

MELBY: I think we did play a pretty active role. It's true that there was a very strong isolationist sentiment in the States, which was sort of a backfire from World War I, and the Senator Nye and the old merchants-of-death hearing that he held.

Cordell Hull was Secretary of State. Before I got into the Service, he had gotten Congress to pass the Trade Agreements Act. We were negotiating trade agreements all over the world. That was the hot thing.

Roosevelt didn't have a great deal of confidence in the Foreign Service particularly. Still, he did in certain people. Primarily Sumner Welles, who was the Under Secretary of State, was very close to Mr. Roosevelt. I don't think this was generally known, but Welles really was the originator of idea of the good-neighbor policy. It was not Roosevelt's idea originally. But Welles developed it out of his time in the Dominican Republic. He wrote the book that started the good-neighbor policy, and called it Naboth's Vineyard.

I think the United States was being active around the world. The disarmament conferences were going on, France, Britain, and Japan. There was a Kellogg-Briand Non-Aggression Pact going on. I think the United States was really quite active.

There was Manchurian business. The Lytton Commission at that time—the United States was very active, even though we were not a member of the league. The Lytton Commission still was a League of Nation's mission. But we were involved with that one.

As for Hitler, we didn't try to do much that way. There wasn't much we could do over there in that.

Q: Of course, your initial assignments were in Latin America, weren't they? When were they and what were you doing? Because I want to move basically up to the Moscow assignment, but I think we should cover the Latin American one first.

MELBY: Well, after the Foreign Service school, I was then assigned to Caracas, Venezuela. And I was there for two years.

Q: What type of work were you doing then?

MELBY: Well, unfortunately the embassy in Caracas was a little bit over-staffed. There wasn't a great deal to do. The main problems involved the Venezuelan oil industry, with a great deal of American investment. Obviously, Dr. Corrigan the ambassador, handled most of the negotiations involved there, along with Ted Scott, who was Counselor.

As it happened, not long after I arrived, war broke out. This would be in 1939—I said I stayed in the Foreign Service School until early '38. It was early '39—some clown in the White House had a bright idea, with the outbreak of war, one Foreign Service officer should be assigned to keep track of and watch every German ship in the world. And it so happened there was one in Puerto Cabello, down on the coast of Venezuela. And I, as low man on the totem pole, drew that assignment to go to Puerto Cabello and sit there and look at that German ship! [Laughter]

Now it was in the inner harbor in Puerto Cabello, so it had a great deal of difficulty getting out. In addition to that, the engine had been taken out of it! So it couldn't move, anyway. But it took six months to get that order countermanded from the White House. So for six months, I sat there. [Laughter]

Q: Perfecting your Spanish, I assume?

MELBY: Well, my Spanish was all right. I knew Spanish. But one advantage to me was that I had not really completed my work on my doctoral dissertation. I had all the research done, but I still had the writing to do. Well, I had six months there to do nothing but sit there with that ship. The Skavatrid was the name of it. And I sat there, overlooking the harbor, where I could look out and see the ship from the Hotel de lost Banos, and I wrote my doctoral dissertation. That's the way I got my degree.

And after that, I was married by this time, my wife came back to El Paso—she was an El Paso girl—for the birth of our second child. So I followed a little later. When I got to Washington, I wanted an assignment in the Department, and I conned my way into being assigned to the American Republics Division. I was put on the Peru-Ecuador desk. And I was there, on that desk, for two years.

Q: What was our interest in Peru and Ecuador? This was when?

MELBY: This was July, 1941. And I was there two years.

The interest was not planned, believe me, but I still remember—my wife had not joined me in Washington at this point, I still had an apartment there before she came—I'd been out to dinner with some friends, on the evening of July Fourth. And when I got back to my apartment, I turned on the radio. There was an announcement that Peruvian forces had invaded the Ecuadoran province of El Oro and just wiped it off the map, pretty much. Not that there was anything there, because there wasn't, not much. But it was all the people there had.I figured the next morning I'd better get to the office early, which I did. And when I walked into my office, the phone was ringing, and Sumner Welles was on the phone. And he said, “John, you've heard the news?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, stop that war!” and he slammed the phone down. [Laughter] And that's what I did for two years, was stop that war.

Q: You're a relatively junior officer in the United States Department of State, and there's a war between Ecuador and Peru. And you're ordered to stop the war. May I ask the question: how does one go about this?

MELBY: Well, it would take all night to tell you that. It's a question of getting the Peruvians to stop it. And buying off the Ecuadorans. Arranging for concessions to them. It was a very complicated problem, actually.

Q: But you took this seriously—

MELBY: Darn right. Welles wasn't kidding. He meant do whatever had to be done to stop the hostilities.

Q: And you were able to contact our embassies and try to work out—I mean, we were playing the good neighbor in trying to stop two of our other neighbors from ripping the hell out of each other.

MELBY: And I worked with the Ecuadoran and Peruvian embassies in Washington.

Q: And you were involved in that rather famous boundary commission that came along and drew a line that kept—

MELBY: I set it up.

Q: Because I've interviewed other ambassadors who always had trouble with that thing.

MELBY: Of course it turned out it went on forever.

Q: Yes. We're talking about up into the '60s, anyway.

MELBY: When I was on it, I was involved in the first one and we had the first aerial survey done of that boundary. Because nobody knew where the boundary was. And I had to arrange with the Pentagon to get the American Air Force to go down there. The men who were involved, actually, ended up in the long run being good friends of mine. Paul Cullen was in command of them. And they photographed the whole boundary. The argument on the thing went on for years after that.

Q: I wanted to concentrate on another aspect of your career, but this is really a solid example of a time when the United States got involved in something and at least stopped the fighting. Maybe there's no final solution to something like this, but at least you found a way to stop the fighting.

MELBY: And there's never been any fighting since. That one attack in 1941 was the last actual hostilities that have ever taken place.

Q: Every once in a while, I think Ecuadorans come up and throw stones at our embassy because of that. Other than that, I think that's the major hostility.

MELBY: See, part of the settlement had to be that Peru wanted half of Ecuador's territory, the Amazonian part of it. This is what Welles had to deal with at the Rio conference in 1942, was to con the President of Ecuador into agreeing to this, of giving up half of his territory. Because Peru had the support of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. And the blackmail that Manuel Prado [y Ugarteche], the president of Peru, was pulling on us was that if we didn't somehow force the president of Ecuador to agree to those terms, that Prado would keep Peru out of joining us in the war effort. And he would keep Brazil and Argentina out as well.

So Welles just had to take the president of Ecuador aside at Rio and say, “Look, this is the terms. You've got to do it. This is your contribution to prosecution of the war against Germany.”

And the president said, “Mr. Welles, you know you're asking me to commit political suicide.”

Mr. Welles said, “I know. And I'm still asking.”

The president agreed, “All right, I'll do it.” And that's the way Peru got the additional part of the Ecuadoran Amazon. And they thought there was oil there, which, actually, there was, as it turned out. But even Ecuador has some oil now, too. Ecuador has lived on that oil.

Q: You were there until spring of 1943. Then you were assigned to where?

MELBY: When the boundary dispute was finished, we were in the war and I was feeling a little foolish doing nothing, because there wasn't much going on otherwise. So I asked to take military leave, for which I got the balling out of my life from Howland Shaw, who was assistant secretary of state for personnel. He said, “Nothing doing. You know what

happened to the British in World War I. It's not going to happen here." The British Foreign Office was decimated. All of them were drafted in the British Army and most of them were killed. British diplomacy never recovered from that.

I said "All right. Then send me abroad." Well, I'd always had a hankering to go to Moscow. I wanted to see it for myself. So I was assigned to Moscow.

Q: Well, how does one go to Moscow? This was 1943. We're at war with Japan and Germany. And Moscow, while not under siege, the war is still very iffy.

MELBY: Yes, it is. My route of march was long when planes didn't fly as far and as fast in those days. So I went to Miami, to British Guyana, mouth of the Amazon to Belem. Recife in Brazil across the Atlantic to Liberia, Fisherman's Lake. Around the bottom of Africa, the bulge out there [tracing route on a map], to what was then the Gold Coast, now called Ghana.

I had a White House priority pass, as a matter of fact, because right at the time I was leaving, suddenly Litvinov, the Soviet ambassador, was recalled to Moscow, without warning, without even saying goodbye. The White House gave me a pass to try and catch him. Well, he was moving so fast, I never did catch him. I got as far as Ghana and I was exhausted. So I gave up trying to catch him. And I sat on the beaches of Africa for ten days and recuperated. Then we went over to Khartoum, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Basra, the Persian Gulf, and Tehran. And then up across the Caucasus, across Caspian Sea, to Kuybyshev, which still had the some of the American embassy.

Q: That's where the capital and pretty much the whole government had been moved after the major assault in November or December of 1941.

MELBY: But by the time I got there, most embassies had moved back. We just had the remnants of an office in Kuibyshev, in the Urals. Warwick Perkins was in charge of the

office, he and a couple of clerks. That was about it. Then I went from Kuibyshev into Moscow.

Q: What was your job in Moscow?

MELBY: I never really had much of a job because the embassy was badly over-staffed. And it was done deliberately because nobody knew whether the Germans were going to break through at Stalingrad. And the embassy would be cut off.

Q: The siege of Stalingrad was going on at this time, wasn't it?

MELBY: Yes. When we flew in, we came over the Elburz mountains and stopped in Baku for breakfast. And then we had to fly at almost ground level up to Kuibyshev to avoid detection from German planes. We were that close to Stalingrad.

So the embassy was badly over-staffed. But never was the staff decreased. And for the first few months—Admiral Standley left shortly after I got there. I overlapped him by only a few weeks. He left and he never returned.

I'd moved into Spaso house, which was the ambassador's residence. I stayed there the whole time I was in Moscow. Harriman came as ambassador after the Moscow conference of foreign ministers. He came with Hull and the others. And he stayed, of course, and became the ambassador.

Q: Were you working in the political or economic sections, or AID?

MELBY: I wasn't really do much of anything. I worked part of the time in the code room. We were all taking our turn doing that. I had nothing much to do. Max Hamilton was charg# d'affaires when the admiral left. And he didn't know how long he was going to be there or who was going to replace Standley.

There was a huge military mission there. And that was all the Russians were interested in, was the military affairs. We had no part of that, really. We didn't have any part, really. So I didn't have much of anything to do, and neither did anybody else.

Then, when Harriman came in November of '43, he brought with him Sam Speiwak He had gotten permission to open up an OWI office.

Q: OWI means Office of War Information. It later was turned into USIA.

MELBY: USIA went it's abroad; OWI when it's at home.

Sam Speiwak came to be the head of the office. Well, it was quite clear when Sam got there that he wasn't going to stay. And, in fact, he took one look—he came originally from the Ukraine. I think one reason he had taken the job was his mother still lived in the Ukraine. And I guess that was the reason Averell brought him. Thought he spoke Russian, would be interested.

Sam got sick as soon as he got there and the few weeks he was there, before he went back to Washington on consultation, mostly I sat around talking to him. He sat and he just stayed in bed. We had a leak in the ceiling, and he had an umbrella over his head to keep the water and rain off. [Laughter] It was a very entertaining period.We all knew that Sam wasn't coming back. So Averell asked me to take over the office. And for a year, I was the acting director of OWI in Moscow.

Q: So, here you were, chief information person. What could you do? Obviously, you must have been under tremendous constraints. Soviet society was—

MELBY: Surprisingly, no, not at this time. We did the usual function of press releases and so on. There wasn't any censorship involved. The primary job that we had to do was—Averell's daughter and I, she went to work for me. She had been working for Newsweek in London, and she came with him to be his hostess. Because his wife never came out to

Moscow. We had permission to publish a magazine in Moscow called America. Which was the glossy job of all time. It made Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, all the rest of them, look like cheap publications.

Q: Where did you get the equipment to do all this?

MELBY: It was all done in the States. It was the most complicated business. The text was all written in the States. It was cabled out to Moscow. We translated it into Russian. It was then cabled back in Russian to Washington—because Washington Russian was still Czarist Russian, not Soviet Russian. So we had a lot of changes. It was printed in the states, and shipped out. And it was a very expensive, glossy job.

Q: Well, when you say shipped out, we're talking still about a time when we were having a hell of a time getting convoys through to Murmansk and taking tremendous losses. And part of this was getting this magazine?

MELBY: It was the most popular item ever put out in the Soviet Union. Distribution was about 50,000 copies, and they were all gone before they arrived.

Q: Well, then we're not talking about something that wasn't without value.

MELBY: It was enormously valuable. That and the Sears Roebuck catalog were the most valuable pieces of literature ever distributed in the Soviet Union.

Q: Did you have much reason to call for what the line should be? Or what we were trying to do?

MELBY: No, we had lots of ideas about what should be in it. Then Washington listened, too.

Q: What were we particularly trying to emphasize about the United States in this popular magazine?

MELBY: Trying to show American life as it was. It was no snow-job at all. Russians didn't believe a lot of the stuff we published. I remember we had one particular item, photographs of River Rouge plant, a Ford plant.

Q: This was at that time a bomber plant, wasn't it?

MELBY: But the shot was of the workers' parking lot. These thousands of automobiles parked there. And the Russians didn't believe those were owned by the workers. They said, “No, this is a fake shot! It can't be true in the land of capitalism.”

Q: Did you have any contacts with Soviet officialdom or with Russians?

MELBY: I had a great deal. Of course, we worked for the press office and the foreign office.

Q: Did they have any problems with what we were putting out?

MELBY: Not particularly. We had no trouble with that. In fact, when I finally ended up in China after the San Francisco conference, who should be the new Soviet ambassador in Chungking but the man who'd been head of the press office in the foreign office in Moscow, who was a good friend of mine, A. A. Petrov. And his staff, most of them I'd known in Moscow, too. So it was a sort of old home week for me.

Q: So there was real allied loyalty, at least at your level. What was Harriman like, as a boss?

MELBY: Well, I thought he was pretty good. He had a few misconceptions to get over. When he arrived, he thought he was going to deal with Stalin as he had with Churchill. He was just going to spend weekends at Stalin's dacha, wherever that would be. And it was going to be “Joe” and “Ave” and so on. And, as it turned out, Harriman didn't even see Stalin for weeks. It took him a long time before he could present his credentials. Stalin

was a busy man, and he wasn't about to sit around and gossip with one of these upstart ambassadors. Averell never did have anything but correct, pleasant relations—but he got along with Stalin all right.

He used to have to see Stalin when it suited his purposes, which was usually after midnight. Of course, Stalin went to work at midnight. And then he worked all night, the rest of the night. Slept all day. It was a kind of an irregular life. But if the Russians wanted to live that way, that was their business. After all, it was their country.

So, Harriman never got to know anybody. I mean, he knew Molotov, the foreign minister, but it was strictly on a very formal basis.

Q: How was he as a boss? Did he give you a difficult time? Was he a difficult person to work for?

MELBY: Not at all. He was very easy to work for. He liked the Foreign Service, appreciated it. He had great respect for language officers we had there, whom I was not one. He enjoyed Kennan and got along well. Thompson, the others.

He was a man with a lot of peculiarities and strange mannerisms sometimes. He very seldom went to the chancery. He set up his office in his own bedroom. He had a huge bedroom in Spaso, and he worked there. He went down to the chancery only once a month or every other week. So he never had his office in the chancery, which was right on Red Square in those days.

Q: George Kennan was the deputy chief of mission at that time?

MELBY: That's right. He was Minister-Counselor

Q: How did you find him?

MELBY: George and I never hit it off particularly well. I think he thought I was not a language officer. He didn't think I was making much progress on learning Russian. He thought I made a better newspaperman than I did a Foreign Service officer. I finally got around to seeing an efficiency report he once submitted on me, that I should never have seen, and I did, under the Freedom of Information Act. In it he said that he thought I would probably be more at home as a newspaperman, but that I undoubtedly had qualities which were enough to warrant keeping me on. It wasn't worth the trouble to get rid of me. And I never did become a language officer.

Q: Well, we're talking about someone assigned in a hurry, rather than taking a couple of years off. The Kennans and the Thompsons had about three years in which they were—in war time, you go to a post and you don't have that time.

MELBY: I didn't have any difficulties with George.

Q: No, but you found him sort of aloof?

MELBY: Yes, we just didn't have much to say to each other.

Q: What was your impression of the Soviets and the Soviet system at that time? You were coming from a different climate, both Washington and Latin America. And all of a sudden, you're in this thing which you've always wanted to see. I think almost everybody wants to get a look at the system. You had pretty good access. How did you feel about what you saw?

MELBY: I suppose one of the answers to that one is: I've never been back to Moscow, nor have I had any slightest desire to go. Yet despite the fact that it was a lot easier than it had been and certainly a great deal easier than it was before the war was over, leave was like getting out of jail.

I didn't like the climate particularly. I wouldn't like the winter weather much, anyway. My interest was—I'd seen it, and that was enough. It seemed to me that they had taken a kind of an orthodox Marxism, and even Leninism, and Stalin had perverted it. Worst thing that ever happened to Marxist theory was the Soviet Union.

Q: Were you seeing the dark side of this? Were you and others pretty well isolated at this juncture?

MELBY: Of course we were isolated. We did have Russian friends, particularly among the artistic community. I knew a great many of them. But it was on the kind of easy, easy basis. After all, Moscow had been at war.

And the artists we saw, and the musicians—for instance, Prokofiev was a good friend of mine. And Shostavkovich I knew him too. And I knew his mother even better. But they couldn't do anything in the way of entertaining. They didn't want any foreigners seeing the way they had to live.

Contacts with them were usually set up in someone's apartment that had been provided for that purpose. Otherwise, though we could travel, we had no difficulty once you got away from Moscow. You would just get on a train and go someplace. So I saw quite a bit of Russia when I was there.

Q: You didn't feel you were being shadowed?

MELBY: Sure we did! We knew we were. We knew everything we said was probably being taped or at least being bugged. Except that maybe there wasn't quite as much bugging going on at that time because they were short on manpower. They didn't have the people to do it.

But the people you did know, did meet—and this was the tragic side of it—he'd be the only surviving member of his family. After all, the Russians lost 35 million people—killed!—in that war. This was the tragic part of it.

Q: Were the people you talked to talking about the great purges of the '30s? Or was this just not a topic of conversation?

MELBY: No. During the war, the whole ideology was thrown out. The whole feel of the propaganda going on at the time, “Fighting for the Russian soil”. And even ranks were reinstituted in the Red Army. And they had to put out regulations saying “Officers will not hang on the outside of buses.”

Of course, that all changed again when the war was over.

Q: Then, we'll move on to your China experiences. You were assigned directly from Moscow to China?

MELBY: No. From Moscow, I had been assigned to the San Francisco conference.

Q: This was within the summer of '45?

MELBY: Yes. I left Moscow when Roosevelt died, the morning after.

Q: April of '45.

MELBY: Yes. I went directly to San Francisco. In the meantime, Averell had been talking about having officers with some Russian experience to various obvious spots around the world. And one of those, of course, was Chungking.

He originally suggested that maybe I'd want to go to Budapest. Well, I didn't want to go to Budapest. He finally came up with Chungking. “Why don't you go there and see what the

Russians are up to? It's no question of becoming a China officer. Just go out and look, and see what they're doing."

In my case, there was also somebody else involved. Ed Flynn, who had been the political boss of the Bronx, and whom Roosevelt had brought out to Yalta with Stettinius, after Yalta, came to Moscow, Flynn came along with him. Stettinius went back to Washington, but Flynn stayed in Moscow.

He had a secret commission from Roosevelt. "Stay and talk to Molotov about a possible Vatican-Kremlin concordat." Flynn was a prominent Catholic layman, close to Spellman. And I was sort of assigned to Flynn. The OWI thing was finished when Joe Phillips, who'd been editor of Newsweek, came out to relieve me. So I didn't have much to do then.

Averell just assigned to me to sort of look after Flynn, who had a drinking problem, and he liked the ladies. Mostly, Averell just wanted me to see if he was drinking. But he wasn't. He was on the wagon, and he never did take a drink again. But Ed and I became very good friends!

He spoke to Molotov, who said, "Why not? When you go back, on your way, you're going to stop off at the Vatican. Talk to the Pope about it." He said, "Why shouldn't the two of us have some sort of concordat? Time means nothing to either of us. Try it and see what happens." Molotov said, "I suspect the Pope will be a little less interested than I am. But maybe Spellman can do something with him."

So Flynn then did stop off and he did talk to the Pope. And before he left, he said, "When this thing is set up, I'm going back to Rome as the President's representative to be in charge of this concordat. Would you like to come with me?"

I said, "Sure."

He said, "All right. We've got to get you out of here."

And this is where the Chungking thing came up. I, more or less, suggested that myself. Because Roosevelt then died. But Flynn still thought that Truman, once he did his homework—which Truman was very good at—that the agreement between Molotov and the Pope would still be worked out. So Flynn said, “You go to Chungking, and have a look at it. When I get this thing set up, I'll send for you.” He said, “In the meantime, you cannot tell the Department about this.”

Averell knew about it, of course. Averell sometimes told the Department things, and sometimes he didn't. This one he didn't do.

So, I did finally get out to China.

Q: First, did you take part in the UN San Francisco conference?

MELBY: Yes. I was in the group of Foreign Service officers that were assigned to various delegations. Delegation liaison.

Q: What did you do?

MELBY: Oh, it was getting them California neckties and running errands for them.

Q: It was really a “meet her and greet her,” in a way?

MELBY: That's right, and keep them happy. If they got in trouble or didn't know where they were, arrange things for them and show them around town. Just generally make yourself useful.

Now, I was the only one of the whole group who had nothing to do. Because the Russians, right from the beginning, let it be known that they didn't want any help. And I was never even permitted on the floor where the Russian delegation was at the St. Francis Hotel!

They wouldn't let me up there. Molotov came. He was head of the delegation. So I didn't have, really, anything to do. But I had an awfully good time. It was three months.

Q: Could you discern a real change in the Russian-Soviet attitude towards the United States? From the rather friendly open thing to, now the war, at least in Europe, was over—

MELBY: Little things in the cold war hadn't really started. But, there were indications that it was going to be tough. And on our part, too. It was as much our fault as it was theirs.

Q: Well, how did you get to Chungking? Could you describe the situation in Chungking?

MELBY: I got to Chungking by going through Europe. Because the war was over. Japan had just surrendered. The Pacific was hopeless. So I went the other way; I went eastward.

I stopped off in Rome on my way. My brother had been in Switzerland all during the war. He was in the Foreign Service, too. He came down from Bern to see me in Rome. We spent a week there.

Then I went from Rome to Karachi, Calcutta, over the hump into Kunming and then down to Chungking.

Q: Who was the ambassador in Chungking and what was the situation at that time? By this time Japan had surrendered.

MELBY: The ambassador was one Major General Patrick J. Hurley, that perfect model of a modern major general. Happily, by the time I go to Chungking, he was gone. He'd gone back to Washington on leave.

I say “happily” because I'd known Hurley before. He and I, believe it or not, are fraternity brothers. At the time of my first meeting with him, he was grand consul of the Sigma Chi fraternity, when I was consul of my chapter at Wesleyan. And I'd met him a couple of times since. And just as I left Moscow, Hurley showed up. I don't know what he was doing; I've

forgotten now. But he stayed with us at Spaso and huffed and puffed his way around. So I didn't particularly want to see him.

Q: What was his reputation, for those who wouldn't be familiar with him?

MELBY: Well, you see, he had been in China. The President sent him out, mainly, I think, to get him out from under foot in the White House. To work on a coalition between the communists and the Nationalists. And Hurley arrived all pro-communist. He said, “They're just like a bunch of Oklahoma Republicans with guns.”And he went scooting to Yenan, which was communist headquarters at this time, and he produced a draft agreement. Or rather, Mao Zedong had produced an agreement. And Hurley said, “This is fine. Except it's missing something.” So Hurley added the American Bill of Rights. Mao looked at it, and his eyes bugged out. He said, “Chiang Kai-shek will never buy this!”

And Hurley said, “Yes, he will, if I tell him to.”

Mao said, “Okay, go ahead, if you can sell it, it's fine with us.”

So they all signed it. And Hurley took it back to Chungking with him and showed it the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. His eyes bugged out, too. He said, “You must be crazy to bring me this! I'll never sign anything like this.” And at this point, Hurley started getting very pro-Nationalist.

Q: Why was that?

MELBY: Hurley was crazy. I think he was beginning to get a little senile. And he stayed on. He came out originally just as special envoy. He was made ambassador when Clarence Gauss resigned, in frustration. And he wasn't ambassador for very long. He certainly raised a lot of hell while he was there.

Q: You arrived there just after he had left?

MELBY: I arrived after he left to come back on consultation. He thought he was returning.

Q: What was the feeling at the embassy? Here you arrive, you're the new man on the block, you're not an old China hand.

MELBY: It was absolutely incredible. Everybody jumped on me, the new man, everybody to tell me his story of the skullduggery going on, or the corruption going on, of Hurley's behavior, of everyone trying to undercut everybody else.

Q: This was within the embassy?

MELBY: Yes. It was an incredible introduction to things.

Q: You had been in a wartime embassy in Moscow where at least you had no problems.

MELBY: No internal problems.

Q: This was a squabbling embassy? It was not "us against Hurley," it was "us against us?"

MELBY: Well, it was a squabbling embassy. All the political officers in the embassy, after Hurley had left, all joined with George Atcheson, who at that time was charg# d'affaires, in signing a telegram to Washington protesting Hurley's views on what was going on in China, and what should be, and what our policy should be. And Hurley was simply furious when he saw it, when he got back to Washington.

And it was all that group. Davies, Service, Atcheson, Emerson, they were the ones in the Foreign Service who had the trouble. All the trouble with the China officers has been Hurley's doing. Those of us who came after Hurley never had any trouble because of China.

Q: So, really, this is a slightly different focus. Because at one point, the focus was, "All right, a group of officers lost China." But it was a more focused group than that. Hurley had a Foreign Service hit list.

MELBY: The cohesion within the embassy wasn't bad at all. The Foreign Service officers got along all together. They weren't trying to cut each other's throats.

But there were all sorts of people floating around. There was the Milton Miles business out in Happy Valley. He was an American admiral who was advising Tai Li, who was head of Chiang Kai-shek's secret police, on how to torture communist prisoners and so on.

And one mission after another was coming out and going off in all directions, and another mission would come, and so on. And none of this was coordinated within the embassy. Clarence Gauss never managed to get control of those outside his own immediate embassy family.

So that when the special advisors came out for Chiang Kai-shek, or when Vice President Wallace was out there, Lauchlin Currie came out on a special mission. Roosevelt was a great one for sending missions out.

Q: How about Truman?

MELBY: Truman never did that.

Q: So this is before your time, that all this was happening?

MELBY: The hangover was still there. The Army was fighting the Navy, and the Navy was fighting the Marine Corps. Everybody was into everybody. When George Marshall came, later on, that ended right there.

Q: You were there when George Marshall came?

MELBY: Yes. I had been there a couple of months.

Q: Did he have much to do with the embassy?

MELBY: He had nothing to do with the embassy. Literally. We were around, and we briefed him from time to time. Initially, of course, we did a great deal more than we did later on. After he got to know his way around, he really had nothing to do with us at all.

Q: You were the new boy on the block, you had these China hands, people who really were experienced in China. What were they saying about the situation and what we should be doing?

MELBY: They saw the situation and said, “It's hopeless.” All the career officers, without exception, agreed that the communists were going to win. Didn't mean they looked on it with any great favor.

On the other hand, they just thought the Nationalists were hopeless. They were corrupt beyond measure. They were going to get worse. And as John Davies put it in one memorandum, “The fact is that the future in China belongs to the communists.”

So what were we going to do about it? Are we going to live with it or are we going to fight it? And how can we fight it? And, are we prepared to take on the whole Chinese community?

Obviously, the answer was, “No!” Just saying, “the future belongs to the communists,” didn't mean that you agreed with it. “It” being the idea, or with them. It was simply that you saw that at that time, they were absolutely incorruptible. They were dedicated. They knew what they were doing. They were in touch with the masses.

That's one thing that Mao insisted on: always stay in touch with the masses. Chiang Kai-shek had lost touch completely. We were backing a dead horse. We might as well get used to it, learn to live with it.

Q: Well, there were some changes within six months of your arrival in October of '45. So by spring of '46, your embassy had moved to Nanking and you had a new ambassador?

MELBY: No, Dr. Stuart wouldn't come on board until late summer.

Q: Why did you move to Nanking?

MELBY: Because the government moved there.

Q: Was this closer to the scene of action?

MELBY: Well, it didn't matter that it was closer to the scene of action. Diplomatic corps always move with the government.

Q: Who was the new ambassador? And can you describe how he operated?

MELBY: John Leighton Stuart. He'd been a missionary in China for 50 years. The last 20 or 25 years, he'd been president of Yenching University, which was one of the model universities of China.

General Marshall asked him to be ambassador because most of the leaders, prominent people, not only the Kuomintang, but the communists, too, had all been students of his. And considering the special Chinese relationship between teacher and student, the general thought that perhaps Dr. Stuart could persuade the Chinese to sit down and talk to each other, and maybe this way you could work out their differences.

And Dr. Stuart agreed with him. He thought it was worth the chance. So he took the job. He didn't know anything about American foreign policy. He couldn't care less! He was

interested in China. He wanted to see the fighting, civil war ended in China. It just killed him to see what the Chinese were doing to each other.

Q: How did he operate?

MELBY: Well, he felt himself responsible to Marshall. And then, of course, when Marshall left, to the Department, in a sense. Particularly since—by this time Walt Butterworth, who was minister-counselor, had gone back as head—Marshall took him with him—of our Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. So there was that connection Stuart had with the Department.

But, beyond that, nothing. He never moved into the chancery. He never had an office there.

Q: You were mentioning your later career as a teacher. Could you explain about this Chinese student that you had?

MELBY: Well, he wasn't a student. He was an older man who was getting his Ph.D. at Notre Dame, Yu-ming Shaw who's now head of the Taiwanese Information Service. And I met him in Toronto at either a meeting of the American Historical Association or the Association for Asian Studies. He was just finishing his doctoral dissertation, which was a biography of Dr. Stuart. He was puzzled by the meaning of the initials on telegrams. He'd been going through Foreign Relations, and of course, as usual, everything that came out—whether they were telegrams or dispatches—were always signed by the ambassador. And Shaw was confused that somehow Dr. Stuart's views didn't seem to be consistent, about China and so on.

But what he didn't understand was the way the embassy worked. Most of that stuff, Stuart would sign; he signed everything, of course. Just usual things. That didn't mean he'd seen it, let alone read it. All that was done in the chancery.

Sometimes Butterworth did it, sometimes the rest of us in the political section did it. Or we did it together and it would be a collective work. Sometimes our initials would be on it, and sometimes it wouldn't. But it all looked as though it was Dr. Stuart.

Q: But he was not a hands-on ambassador?

MELBY: In no sense of the word, no.

Q: You were in the political section. What were you doing, when we got to Nanking?

MELBY: Not only was I in the political section and doing political reporting, but also I had set up our press translation service, which was an idea I had picked up in Moscow. And I organized that, and I was running that. I was also the embassy liaison with USIA. I was the embassy liaison with our cultural affairs office. I was the embassy press officer. In fact, I had a half a dozen jobs that I was doing.

Unfortunately, I was just doing too much. I was “China” in there for a while. Particularly since I was the only one left in the embassy who had served in Chungking. So every new person who came in to Nanking, in the diplomatic corps, from any embassy around town, the first you had to do was come talk to me. “What was it like in Chungking?” Which took up a lot of my time.

Q: This is always something that is forgotten. I know that, at one point, I was the old hand in Yugoslavia. And I spent a great deal of time in our embassy giving the background of what we were doing.

MELBY: And then also, the last year I was there, I negotiated the treaty that set up the Fulbright Foundation, which was the first Fulbright Foundation to be set up.

Q: This was in the midst of the civil war?

MELBY: Oh, yes. The civil war was coming to an end, but we still were setting up the Foundation. And I'd negotiated the treaty. And therefore, I was made the first director of the Foundation, and I operated that first year, too.

Q: Could you describe how the embassy was reacting to this civil war that was moving, seemingly slowly, but in an unstoppable way, towards Nanking?

MELBY: Fatalism. “It's coming.” It just felt like the grave-watchers, watching the whole civilization, 2000 years of history going down the drain.

Q: Did you have any feeling at the time, “Gee, we better be careful how we're reporting this”? Were you under any, sort of, “Be careful, fellows”?

MELBY: No. It didn't touch us there.

Q: You reported it as you saw it? Nobody was saying, “These reports aren't going very well”?

MELBY: We knew they weren't going over very well, but we did it, anyway. We recorded what we saw.

Q: Were you getting anything back from the Department of State saying, “Would you re-examine this issue? Isn't there a bright side to what you're reporting?” Or something like that? You didn't feel there was much backwards and forwards—

MELBY: We were reporting, and the people to whom we were reporting had, at one time, been in the embassy. That was the way the China service operated. John Carter Vincent was the head of the bureau before Walt Butterworth took over, and he knew as much about China as anyone. George Atcheson had been there, too. So an awful lot of stuff we might have reported, we didn't, because we knew the people to whom we were reporting, we knew that their experience was similar to ours and therefore there wasn't any point in

repeating the obvious. A lot of the, shall we say, local color, didn't get reported. Not for lack of interest, but just simply because we assumed that they knew it already. Therefore, why repeat it?

Q: Did you have much contact at that time with the Kuomintang government?

MELBY: Oh, sure. Continually. Day to day. As a matter of fact, Dr. Stuart's Chinese secretary, who had been with him for many, many years, Philip Fugh who died only a few months ago at the age of almost 100, was very close to Chiang Kai-shek. This was one reason that we didn't encourage the old gentleman to go around the chancery, because we knew that the minute Dr. Stuart got a telegram, he would show it to Philip. And the first thing Philip would do would be to read it, and then call for a car and go over to Chiang Kai-shek's office and show it to him!

The world's worst security leak was going on, and Marshall knew it and Butterworth knew it. In order to protect ourselves, insofar as we could, we just simply got where we didn't show the old gentleman any telegrams. Or Walt would take the telegrams over to him and let him read them, and then he'd take them back. He wouldn't leave them with him. Dr. Stuart knew why he was doing it and was kind of amused by it.

Q: But he was interested in other things?

MELBY: Sure. He didn't really care.

Q: Were there any repercussions from bad reports about the situation that would somehow, either through Philip or through reports getting out of Washington, get to Chiang Kai-shek? With Chiang Kai-shek or his officials saying, “What do you mean, reporting that we're corrupt?” You know, sometimes when you report on something, the word leaks out, so that the people you're reporting on know and will call you to task.

MELBY: The Nationalists didn't do that, because they knew that what we were reporting was the truth. And in a sense, they didn't care. The way the corruption was going, it was every man for himself, anyway.

Q: How did you view Madame Chiang Kai-shek?

MELBY: I didn't take quite as dim a view of her as a lot of people did. I felt kind of sorry for her. I didn't know her at all well. She belonged to two worlds. She had been educated in the States, southern-belle type. Chinese didn't trust her, because they thought she was too Westernized. Westerners thought she was still too Chinese. So that she really didn't have many friends. She had a few old Chinese missionary ladies—biddies—who used to come around to tea. But otherwise, she was pretty isolated.

However, the GMO did trust her, in the sense that he relied on her as interpreter. He didn't speak a word of English. He didn't even speak Mandarin, for that matter. He had to conduct Cabinet meetings with an interpreter, because his dialect was Fujian which is a hillbilly dialect, if there ever was one! He didn't even speak good Chinese. But she was very useful to him, that way. I know that General Marshall thought that the GMO really relied on her a great deal. And he, too—although he didn't much like her—in a way, felt kind of sorry for her. She was an impossible woman. Very demanding, like all the Soongs. The whole clan were like that. But she was a very beautiful woman. Very interesting to see her. When she was with Chinese, she was the demure Chinese lady, with the high dressed neck, and flat-chested, and so on. When she was with Westerners, she suddenly was all full-bosomed and so on, and her skirts were slit up to her hip. She had very good-looking legs, too.She was very adept at using her feminine wiles. She took them all into camp. I think the only one who was never affected by her, was General Wedemeyer. He really didn't like her. And he didn't react to her at all.

Q: Did she try anything on him at all?

MELBY: No. With him, it just didn't work. But even Marshall, who was a fairly austere kind of person, he softened up a bit with her. She didn't fool him.

Q: You were doing an awful lot of what we would call, USIA work there, cultural exchange and all this. How about the press corps? Was there much of an American press corps there?

MELBY: Oh, there was a large one there.

Q: Things really got nasty with the press corps and the embassy in Vietnam. But this was almost a different era. Were you all on the same side?

MELBY: Oh, yes, the American press corps, including a lot of foreign newspapermen who weren't American, they had pretty much the run of the embassy.

The New York Times men, Tilman Durdin and Hank Lieberman, the whole crew of them, we would show them telegrams and talk to them.

We only had one newspaperman, once, who betrayed a trust with me, who broke a confidence, but he's the only one. He's now dead—John Roderick. Drowned in Tokyo Bay. The only one who I ever had any reason to question.

We talked to them quite frankly. They were all disgusted with the regime. We all felt the same way.

Q: Were they able to get to the Chinese armies and see what was happening?

MELBY: They did a lot better job than we did. Anybody from the embassy trying to go out just couldn't do it. It was too obvious. And people like me, we didn't speak the language. We didn't have very many language officers, and they didn't speak the local dialects, anyway, either.

But even the press people, sure, they got out with the armies a good deal. And they did quite a bit of field work. But one of the things that came out—we had a reunion of newspaper people from the '30s and '40s in Arizona, about four or five years ago. I was invited to go with them and be with them. The thing that we all agreed on, that John Fairbanks pointed out, who at one time had been head of the OWI office in China, “After all, we have to face the fact that no Westerner ever really got out and knew the peasant. Nobody really knew what was going on in the villages. Only the communists knew that.”

Q: How did you view our constituent post? We had a consulate in communist held territory for some time, didn't we? When they took over, how about in Mukden?

MELBY: That was when the civil war was over. They were there under house arrest. Angus Ward was in Mukden. He was in real trouble. He was accused of espionage, which, frankly, he was guilty of! He'd been working with what was known as ESD-number something or other, which was a CIA outpost. He was up to his eyeballs, working with the crew that he had up there with him in Manchuria. The people in—

Q: Tsingtao?

MELBY: Tsingtao was closed down. But, Peking was open. We had a consul general there. Oliver Edmund Clubb was consul general there. He was under house arrest. Not bothered.

The people in Shanghai had trouble. We had a lot of trouble in Shanghai. The mobs got out of control. It wasn't the government; it was just random looting going on. Fortunately, nobody was killed.

Shanghai was a different city. It was a lot of foreign interest, in the international settlement, in the French quarter. All these were fair game under the communists. When they took over . . .

Q: Can you describe what happened as the People's Liberation Army was beginning to take over close to our embassy? What happened, as far as our embassy was concerned?

MELBY: We evacuated people. I was head of the committee to decide on the evacuation. Sort of by default. Butterworth, back in Washington, probably set up a committee in the embassy, composed of Fred Schultheis who actually was CIA, who was against evacuation at any time. He couldn't bear the idea of being separated from his wife. And Lewis Clark, who was minister counselor, who'd gone through the rape of Nanking in 1937.

Q: Didn't want to have that. That was with the Japanese troops.

MELBY: God knows that we should have evacuated a month ago. Which left me, who had no connections there, with the final vote.

Q: May I ask, were you married at the time? Was your wife with you?

MELBY: Yes, I was married at the time. She was not with me. I had no attachments in China at all.

So I had to make the final decisions. And we were under a lot of pressure from the GMO. “Please don't evacuate!” Because he knew we were considering it, and we were going to do it. He said, “Don't do it, because it will just give the advantage to the communists.”

Finally, it got to the point where I just had to make the decision, “Look, I'm sorry, but we've got to do it.” I didn't want to get all these people—we warned Americans, private citizens, to get out. Which meant mostly missionaries. Most of the business community had left.

Q: How did the missionaries respond?

MELBY: Oh, as usual, missionaries don't do it. They never want to go. And then they get into trouble, and start yelling because the embassy doesn't get them out of trouble. The usual thing.

Embassy dependents. Finally, I just ordered them out. We sent them all over to the Philippines.

Q: What's the timing here?

MELBY: October '48. What finally decided me on it was we weren't getting very good information out of Manchuria. I decided to go up to Mukden again and have a look at it myself. I was going up with Dave Barrett, who was assistant military attach#, who was absolutely bilingual in Chinese. Even gutter Chinese! We were waiting for a plane in the airport in Peking. The planes started shuttling in from Mukden, unloading. Dave Barrett just looked at them and said, “John, I don't have to go to Mukden. When the generals start to evacuate the gold bars and concubines, the flap is on.” And he didn't go. But I did.

I got there, and it was clear that Mukden was going to fall. The communists were in the outskirts of Mukden. It was just a matter of time and they were going to take it over. And once Manchuria was gone, then you knew that all China was gone.

Q: Why was this?

MELBY: Traditionally, he who controls Manchuria, controls China. It's always been the case. There was the famous book by somebody, back in the '30s, Manchuria, the Cockpit of Asia.

I got out on one of the last planes out of Mukden. I went right back to Nanking and issued the evacuation order: “Get the people out and get them out fast.”

Q: When we're talking about getting the people out, who are we talking about?

MELBY: Embassy dependents, which we had a lot—we had a staff of 100 people in Nanking, plus dependents. So it was a large contingent.

Q: The ambassador wasn't playing much of a role in the evacuation?

MELBY: Not in the evacuation, no. We would talk to him about it. Actually, his secretary then, whom Walt Butterworth had brought with him from Madrid, whom later on I married, was wonderful with the old gentleman. She even got along with Philip.

Q: I'm trying to get some of the dates here. So the evacuation came in October, '48. What happened then?

MELBY: They left, and there was a skeleton staff in the embassy. And finally, people like me were ordered out by Washington.

Q: When was that?

MELBY: I left in mid-December of '48. The Department's rationale was that they didn't want to take a chance on anybody who, by any stretch of the imagination, had been connected with any kind of intelligence activity to be caught by the communists.

Q: This was after Ward?

MELBY: No, this was long before Ward.

I was perfectly willing to stay and be occupied. But I could understand how the Department felt about it. Because we didn't know! Things were so bitter at this time, there were incrimination so bad. We had long lost contact with the communists. We didn't know what they were thinking, what they were doing.

Q: In your time there, with the Marshall mission and all, had you had any contact with the communists?

MELBY: Oh, yes. They had an office in Chungking, and one in Nanking. And we all used to see them quite regularly. I knew Zhou En-lai very well. He was the head of the communist office. In fact, Zhou En-lai was the first Chinese I ever met. I had lunch with him the first day I was in Chungking.

Q: How did they deal with you, yourself?

MELBY: Fine. We got along all right.

Q: Talk about "Where are we going, our two countries?"

MELBY: Sure. They were quite open, frankly. No problem. It was easier to talk with them than with the Nationalists. You knew the Nationalists were lying most of the time. The communists never lied.

Q: Were you able to keep up these contacts as the war got worse?

MELBY: Marshall left in January, '47. The summer of '47, Chiang Kai-shek outlawed the communist party. So all there offices in Nationalist China closed. From then on, we had no contact whatsoever.

Q: Were you ever having Chinese coming in from the street saying, "I'm an unofficial emissary of this, and would you do this?" Were there any kind of undercover contacts with you?

MELBY: Well, once the communist party was outlawed, no; they weren't coming into the embassy. Fred Shultheis, who really was CIA, he had a network. People were coming to him, or people he had; his contacts.

Q: How was he calling it? Did he have a different view than anybody else?

MELBY: No. He used to sit in our embassy meetings. He used to draft our telegrams for us, too, sometimes.

Q: So he was reporting: “Hear they come. They're irresistible. This is a corrupt Latin regime.”

MELBY: No.

Q: So, it wasn't a matter of hawks and doves, or hardliners?

MELBY: Mr. Shultheis had impeccable Chinese. He could sit and read comic strips in Chinese. He would read cheap fiction; just sit in a rickshaw and read it, just to keep in practice. He was absolutely fluent in it. His contacts were extraordinary.

Q: But again, there was unanimity within the mission.

Were you having any people from the United States, from the left, coming over saying, “This is a great thing”? And trying to make contact? And you, particularly in your USIA capacity, were you finding yourself dealing with people who were looking forward to this great change in China?

You're shaking your head.

MELBY: No, they weren't coming. We had a raft of visitors coming. But they were people like Eisenhower, when he was Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Colonel Lindbergh came out at one point. Henry Luce used to show up. Bill Bullitt came. People of that sort. We had an endless stream of that kind of visitor.

Q: We've both been attending a historian's paper on Henry Luce. Could you describe your impression of Henry Luce? He was a very influential person in our China policy for some years, as a publisher of Time and Life magazines.

MELBY: I had only met him once. I finally met him once in Nanking. I ran into him on the street in Nanking. He was headed in to see Dr. Stuart. He stopped me—he knew who I was—and we stopped and talked about China. He was giving me a pathetic lament. I believe he said, “Those of you who criticize people like me for our stand in support of the Nationalists, you've got to remember that we were born here. This is all we've ever known. We had made a lifetime commitment to the advancement of Christianity in China. And now you're attacking us for it. You're asking us to say that all our lives have been wasted; they've been futile. They've been lived for nothing. That's a pretty tough thing to ask of anyone, isn't it?”

I said, “Of course it is! I'm still asking it of you. Because things have changed.”

I think Henry Luce was a very troubled man. I think he beginning to have real doubts—this was in the fall of 1947—as to what had happened in China, and had he been wrong after all. Particularly he had them when he was in China. He'd go back to New York, I suppose, and he'd just mirror-image a bit, and he'd revert back to the old China lobby syndrome.

Q: Did any of the members of the conservative wing of the Republican Party come and visit during this period? Or was their criticism pretty much limited to being back in Washington?

MELBY: No, they used to come out. In the summer of '47 we had one group or another. We had some 40 or 50 congressmen who came out. Walter Judd was always dropping in or out. They weren't just criticizing. Wedemeyer came out on a fact-finding mission.

Q: When they came out—you were all seeing one thing. Weren't they seeing the same thing?

MELBY: Yes. And while they were there, they would be saying, “Isn't it dreadful, the things that are happening here!” Then they'd go back to the States and go back into the old pattern again.

Q: Why is this?

MELBY: I don't know. Don't ask me.

Q: Was this puzzling to all of you?

MELBY: Life is a paradox.

Q: You left again, at the end of January, 1948. When did Nanking fall?

MELBY: Nanking didn't fall until late spring of '49. It took quite a bit of time. Peking had already fallen; not by the time I left, but it did fall in January.

The battle of Huai Hai had already started, which was the final engagement. Which I happened to be witnessing because I'd taken one last trip to Peking, mid-December. We were having lunch with Dave Barrett. We began to hear the thuds. One of the mess boys ran in and said, “If you want to get out of here, you'd better get out, because the communists are shelling the airfield!”

So we left lunch right away, and sure enough, they were shelling it. It was a beautiful day, beautiful as only Peking can be in the fall, with the sunshine on the persimmons. It was a clear day and we flew high over the battle of Huai Hai, over the China plain, and you could see out there so clear.

You could see exactly what Lin Piao was doing. This huge enveloping movement that was broken up into literally hundreds, maybe thousands of small pincer movements. Each one moving in, pinching off one group of Nationalist troops after another. It was magnificent! It was fascinating. At the same time, it was horrible. You could imagine the death and

destruction that was going on as villages were burning and people were dying. And when it was over—that particular campaign lasted for two months—there was no Nationalist Army left. The communists had destroyed them all.

Some they captured; there was something like 900,000 prisoners before it was all over, living prisoners, to say nothing of those who had been killed. It was the only real conventional battle the communists fought in the civil war.

Q: The rest was just guerilla warfare?

MELBY: Except for the hundred regiments campaign in 1943, which was a disaster for the communists. They weren't ready for it. It was their Tet offensive, so they say.

Q: You went back in 1948, then, to Washington. Did you go back to the State Department?

MELBY: Yes. I was assigned to the Philippine desk. I had leave coming. So I took the leave and went to Texas.

When I came back, that was about the time we finally decided to do the China White Paper. So I was still officially assigned to the Philippine desk, but I was asked to take charge of the White Paper. It took about five months to do.

Q: Could you explain what the China White Paper was?

MELBY: The White Paper was a decision on the part of the Department, Secretary of State, with the approval of the President, who was enthusiastic about it, to write the record of our relationship with China. With special reference to the period since 1944. And set forth the record, and set it straight. And tell it as it was, no matter who got hurt.

It was not to be a propaganda job, presenting one side. It was to set the record out as we, I, saw it. And that is exactly what we did.

I must have gone over several hundred-thousand documents, picking out essential ones, and writing it, and getting people—I wrote about half of the White Paper myself. Other people wrote other chapters. We worked on it 18 hours a day, from March until August.

We produced this 1,500-page document, which came out August 8, 1949. George Kennan, who at this point had gone to the hospital with another attack of his stomach ulcers, took the White Paper with him to the hospital and read it straight through. He said that it was the greatest state document ever produced by the American government!

The purpose was to call the dogs off from the China lobby. And it didn't work.

Q: It was a group that was not particularly interested in the facts, was it? They essentially had political fish to fry in the United States.

MELBY: The China lobby, insofar as you can define it, was the antecedent of the so-called Committee of a Million Signatures. It was composed of people from a whole political spectrum, from the far right to the far left, who had only one thing in common: for whatever their reasons, they were in complete support of Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationals. That was the only thing they were united on.

Q: Did you ever puzzle out why so many people were so entranced with this admittedly, in retrospect, obviously corrupt, not very pleasant regime?

MELBY: If you can define it, I think it was anti-communism. The American obsession with communism. It drew together an awful lot of people.

Q: From all spectrums. How did you feel? You produced this paper, and then it just didn't seem to have the effect. Was this a great disappointment to you?

MELBY: Oh no, it was just the opposite. It just accrued more fuel for the fire. I thought, “Well, at least the communists are going to be able to say there's something to it. Maybe

they'll like it, and so what." And so help me God, Mao Zedong read the damn thing and proceeded to write five editorials for the official communist newspaper attacking it as proof of how imperialistic American policy had been.

So I figured, "Yes, you can't win." [Laughter]

Q: The truth might make you free, but not loved!

Moving to the Philippines, you were dealing with the Philippines until 1953?

MELBY: Yes. And primarily the Philippines, the job being what do we about the Philippines, to keep the communists from taking over there.

Q: What were you doing on that?

MELBY: We were making R#mon Magsaysay president. Secretly.

Q: Was Magsaysay identified to you all, and you were aware of him quite early in the game?

MELBY: Oh, sure. Yes. He was incorruptible. The man had an enormous amount of energy. At this time, he was chairman of some committee of the Philippine Senate. We knew we had to get rid of [Elpidio] Quirino, because he was unbelievably corrupt and he didn't care one or the other about it. There were reasons why he didn't care.

The Philippines was just going to pieces. At one point, our best estimate was that the Huks actually had the military capability of taking over the Philippine government. Why they didn't know it and why they didn't do it is something that I will never understand. But they didn't.

Q: Did we have contingency plans to put more troops in there?

MELBY: The idea was not to put troops in. Not only not put troops in, but that the American presence was not to be seen. Nobody was to know what we were doing. It was a reassertion of American influence, sub rosa. We were not going to be put in another colonial position there.

Q: How did you operate? What sort of things were you doing as the desk officer for the Philippines to promote Magsaysay and not be colonial?

MELBY: We were paying for the Philippine Junior Chamber of Commerce, which was a group of very active young professional people in the Philippines who were embarrassed by Quirino and determined to get some political change. And they needed money. We were paying for it.

And we also had Ed Lansdale in, who was on loan to CIA, working on Magsaysay, to get him after he was finally named the Secretary of Defense. The way we had to get Magsaysay named the Secretary of Defense—Myron Cowen was the ambassador, didn't have quite the nerve to go and tell Quirino that he had to name Magsaysay Secretary of Defense. So he asked me to do it. Well, I was sort of back and forth between Manila and Washington. So I didn't get tainted with Philippines the way he did.

Well, I didn't mind. I went around to see Quirino. I said that I had a suggestion—I said it more nicely than this!—"We really must get rid of Roberto Kangleon who was a Moro from Mindanao, and who had been one of the great leaders of the Philippine constabulary, which had just gone to pot completely. I said, "You've got to get rid of Kungleon. And our suggestion is that you name Senator Magsaysay as Secretary of Defense."

He hedged a bit, and he said, "No, I can't really do that."

And I said, "Why can't you?"

"Well, I don't want any trouble."

I said, “Well, all I can say is that if you don't do it, there will be no more American aid. No more military aid. I'm prepared to recommend that it be cut off.”

Q: So this was something that had been duly considered by our—

MELBY: Of course! I wasn't doing this on my own.

Q: Who were some of the actors on our side?

MELBY: Myron Cowen was the ambassador. Dean Acheson was Secretary of State. The President knew it. This was from the White House on down.

Q: But you were the messenger with the bad news. So what happened?

MELBY: He named Magsaysay Secretary of Defense. Magsaysay merely started getting the troops out in the field, getting them out of the garrison, getting them out chasing the Huks, and, primarily, also to stop some of the corruption among the Philippine troops. For this, he had to pull some drumhead court-martials, sentence a few people to death. But word got around pretty fast, and a new kind of Philippine Army was in existence.

The time came when Magsaysay resigned as Secretary of Defense and announced that he was no longer a member of the Liberal party. He was becoming a Conservative, and running to oppose Quirino in the next presidential election. But this happened after I was finished with it. And he won the election. He got 85% of the vote. And three years later he was dead, killed in an accident.

Q: Back in Washington, who was looking over your shoulder, dealing with the Philippines?

MELBY: Nobody. I had been called in by Dean Acheson and told that, “I've got a lot of things to do, a lot of things on my mind. You're on the Philippine desk now. You go ahead

and decide what has to be done." He said, "Of course, keep me informed as to what you're doing. I want to know what you're doing."

Of course, that was one thing that was Acheson's great strong holding point with Truman: he always kept Mr. Truman informed of what he was doing.

"And if you get into trouble, come and see me." He said, "Otherwise, I don't want to be bothered. I don't want to know the details. I don't have time for it."

Q: Who was Assistant Secretary for the Far East at that time?

MELBY: Butterworth.

Q: And you'd already worked with Butterworth before?

MELBY: Oh, sure. He was in Nanking. And I'd worked with him back in Washington, too.

Q: He had other things to worry about, too.

MELBY: The main thing he had to worry about was getting confirmed as assistant secretary. Because the China lobby was after him because he'd failed, or so they said. He got his confirmation. Then all he wanted to do was to get out.

Q: So he went to Canada?

MELBY: No, this is much later. He went to Sweden as minister. And Dean Rusk was assistant secretary. I worked with Dean Rusk.

Q: Was Dean Rusk concentrating on the China problem, or was he working closely on the Philippine thing with you?

MELBY: No, he didn't bother with the Philippines either. None of them did. They just left it up to me and Myron Cowen. We'd run the show ourselves, as I said, keeping people

informed. That we were very scrupulous about. That was one thing about the Truman Administration, a lot of people in the Truman Administration didn't want to be bothered with the details. But they didn't want to be caught not knowing what was going on. So long as you kept them fully informed, then they could read or not read whatever it was you sent them. Then you were covered, and they would cover you.

Q: You did have the feeling that there was a trust between the political appointees and the professionals?

MELBY: Oh, absolutely.

Q: It was, "This is a matter for professionals to deal with. Let us know any political aspects, and we'll take care of that."

MELBY: The only time I had any problem was, the Navy dug their heels in about the Subic Bay, something they didn't want to do. I forget what it was. The Filipinos wanted us to do something—cut some particular privilege at Subic, which seemed reasonable enough to me and to Myron. And the Navy was just flatly refusing. So I told Acheson that I was at this impasse with this thing. And Acheson said, "Well, I'd better send you over to see the President, because it's going to take a directive from the President to break this thing loose from the Joint Chiefs."

And he set up an appointment for me with Mr. Truman. I went over to see him. I walked into the Oval Office; he was working on something. He'd obviously read the memorandum that had been prepared for him. He looked up at me and said, "Mr. Melby, are you sure that this is the right thing to do?"

And I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. President, I am."

He said, “Well, you damn well better be. Or I'll have your head!” And he smiled, and laughed! [Laughter] And he signed it and handed it to me. And said, “Go on, get out now.” And that was it.

I took that piece of paper and sent it over to the Joint Chiefs. And I got whatever it was I wanted.

That's the way you could deal with Mr. Truman. You didn't fool around with him. You just had to be sure that you knew what you were doing.

Q: Moving on, absolutely untried ground. I know you had trouble with Congress, and this led to your leaving the Foreign Service.

MELBY: I never had trouble with Congress.

Q: What was the problem? Can we go into this?

MELBY: Yes. There's a whole book on it.

Q: I saw the cover this afternoon. The title was—

MELBY: The Cold War Romance of Lillian Hellman and John Melby.

Q: Can you explain?

MELBY: I first met Lillian in Moscow when I was there. Well, we had an affair. And it went on for 40 years. An association. And that was the only charge against me from the Department, that I had maintained an association with one Lillian Hellman, who is a member of the Communist Party, who is alleged to be a member. It didn't say she was. All I could say was, “Yes. It's true. So what?”

Q: Was anyone ever telling you to break it off, beforehand?

MELBY: Sure. Of course.

Q: What happened, as far as the security thing? Was this connected at all with the McCarthy business?

MELBY: It was out of the McCarthy era of suspicion. It was in the very early stages of it. The charges were made and the charges were laid. And I was informed of the charges but I was never allowed to know who had made the charges. I was never permitted to confront those who had accused me of this, or had accused her of anything. It was a true star chamber operation. And it would, many years later, after Bob Newman finally got the FBI reports, that there was no substance to the charges against Lillian. She had been accused by one of the FBI informants of being a communist, who later turned out to be a liar. He'd accused everyone in the world of it.

Q: She was coming out, obviously, of the intellectual left. So this was a name, which also lent some spice—

MELBY: And she was a controversial personality.

Q: How did this impact on you? Did you get people to say that you were being tried?

MELBY: I had more character references than Alger Hiss had. And all the good that that did him!

Q: But did anybody try to impute to you that somehow you were being overly friendly to the Chinese communists, having lunch with Zhou En-lai?

MELBY: China never came into this. China was never mentioned in this. It was only the Stilwell people; Stilwell period people and Patrick Hurley. The rest of us, who were post-war—China were never mentioned.

Q: Can you give me a feeling about the security people in the Department of State? Did you have any reading on what kind of people they were?

MELBY: They were a bunch of finks. They were McCarthy stooges, all of them.

Q: I remember, back when I came in, in 1955. Sort of giggling to myself because you went down in the security wing of the State Department, and everyone was Francis X. something. I mean, obviously all, what could only be termed as Irish or Italian Catholic names there. One had the feeling that this was a group of people that would have very little in common with the normal Foreign Service officer. They were more likely to come out of the precinct policeman type of thing. This was my impression.

MELBY: That's pretty accurate. They didn't know what it was all about. They were administering what was, at this time, a new branch of law, namely administrative law. And most lawyers, except for two or three, four maybe; no lawyer had to have any experience with administrative law. There wasn't anything to go on. My lawyer was a very conservative, well-known practitioner before the Federal Communications Commission. And he just sat there, during my hearing, with his mouth hanging open. He didn't know what to say. He couldn't answer, he couldn't ask a question. He didn't understand what was going on. What kind of legal proceeding is this? And I was just sort of on my own, because he didn't know what to do. He had an assistant, a young man named Ted Barron, who was a little more knowledgeable and tried to salvage things.

In the end, finally, I was suspended. And I decided to get rid of Scharfeld and get another lawyer, who turned out to be Joseph Volpe who had been general counsel of the Atomic Energy Commission. He would handle all of the security problems for the Atomic Energy Commission, including—who was the man who was then one of his clients, Robert Oppenheimer, one of the best men in the business. But by this time, it was too late. Joe did a magnificent job on it, but the board obviously wasn't even listening to him. You could tell from their questions. He would talk, put forth an oration, and they weren't even

listening. They didn't care. They weren't interested. They had already made of their minds: I had not told the truth, I was lying. I was therefore a security risk. There was never any question of loyalty in my case. It was just pure security. I had lied. I hadn't told the truth. Therefore, I was not reliable.

Q: What were they claiming you hadn't told the truth on?

MELBY: Lillian. She was a communist. And I'd said I didn't believe it. I was lying because their informants from the FBI said that she was. But they wouldn't let her testify. They wouldn't let me know who had made the charges against her. I didn't know what I was defending. I could either take their word for it, which turned out to be wrong, or I could recant. Well, I wasn't going to do that.

Q: How did the State Department react?

MELBY: By this time, no one was speaking to anybody else.

Q: So this was only one incident in a whole series of investigations?

MELBY: Sure, there were hundreds going on. And nobody was talking to anybody else. You'd walk down the street and you'd see somebody who you knew charges were laid against; you'd cross the street so that you wouldn't have to speak to them. It was an incredible period.

One of the charges that was laid against me was, “Mr. Melby, we get a report that you've been spending a lot of time hanging around a hotel lobbies. Do you think that while you're going through this, it's wise for you to appear in public?”

I said, “What are you talking about? Hotel lobbies are a public place. I'll go there any time I want to.”

Q: Again, I saw this book—I haven't read it—A Cold War Romance: Lillian Hellman and John Melby, by Robert Newman, University of Pittsburgh. Is this an accurate book, for somebody who wants to understand the era?

MELBY: I've been over that manuscript a half a dozen times, word for word. It's accurate.

Q: Would you describe it as a good book to catch the flavor of the times?

MELBY: Absolutely.

Q: Looking back on it, obviously you went out on a sour note. Still, looking back on your Foreign Service career, what gave you your greatest satisfaction, the greatest feeling of accomplishment?

MELBY: China. Well, no, the Peru-Ecuador War. I was very young and had a lot of responsibility. Participation in the China thing; a ringside seat. Of having some, albeit a small role in the collapse and disappearance of a 3,000-year-year old civilization. Tragic as it was, still, witness to what I think is probably the greatest revolution of modern times. After all, one quarter of the human race lives there. Whatever price one paid for that, was worth it.

Q: I realize that now you're living in Canada. But if a young person comes to you and asks you about a career in the Foreign Service today, how do you reply?

MELBY: Well, I couldn't give any opinion as to the merits of what goes on in the Department now, because I don't really know. I've been out now for 25 years. But I do have one piece of advice. That is, forget this idea of the romance of the Foreign Service, the diplomats in the trench coats. You've got to ask yourself one question, I think, particularly if you're married. And you're going to have to keep it in mind if you're not married, for when you do get married. And that is, believe it or not, most people like to have roots someplace, like to belong someplace. If you're going into the Foreign Service,

you're going to move every 18 months to 4 years from country to country and culture to culture. You're never going to belong anyplace. You're not going to be anywhere. And when you're ready to retire, you really don't have anyplace to go back to. Now, are you prepared to live that kind of life?

As for me, I loved it. That's the way I lived; I still live that way. I would hate to have to belong someplace. But if you don't want to do that, then forget it. Particularly if your wife doesn't like it, if she's miserable being rootless. But those of us who are footloose and wander the world and live in song, and when we die, we die, and bury us wherever we are. I love it.

Q: Well, tell me, what did John Melby do after he left the State Department in 1953?

MELBY: I looked for a job. And nobody was going to hire anybody who had a connection with the Department, let alone anybody who had been fired. They weren't hiring people who'd just been in the Department, period. That was the atmosphere about the Department.

Two years after that, I got an appointment at Yale. I was a resident research associate in Southeast Asian studies.

Q: And you did have your doctorate. You were fortunate to have your doctorate.

MELBY: I was there for a year. I left because they had run out of money. It has since been reactivated. Then after that, I moved to Philadelphia, where a group of us set up an organization in Philadelphia called the National Council on Asian Affairs, on the assumption that American kids knew nothing about Asia or the rest of the world. Geography textbooks at that time would have more pages devoted to Holland than they would to all of Asia. Literally. And we were out to do something about that.

Well, we struggled with that, and we got a lot of things started. We never really got financing on the thing. We ran the thing for five years, and in the meantime I was doing sessional lecturing at the University of Pennsylvania.

And finally, I guess, the kiss of death was given to me by John D. Rockefeller III. He wrote me out a fairly substantial check and then said, “Well, let me give you an advice to go along with this check. That is, that all of you who have any connection with China, get out of it. Go away and do something else. I hate to say it, but I think we're never going to get over the McCarthy period, of who lost China until those of you, like you, go and do something that has nothing to do with China.” And he killed us.

Then I stayed home in Pennsylvania for a couple of years. Then I was Deputy Director of the World Affairs Council in Philadelphia when I got this offer to come to Canada.

Q: So you've been teaching at Guelph University?

[End Tape 2, Side 1. Begin Tape 2, Side 2]

Q: I inadvertently forgot to ask Mr. Melby some questions about an important phase in his later times with the State Department. Mr. Melby, we didn't cover a trip you made to Vietnam. Could you tell when and what were the circumstances?

MELBY: Well, the French had been asking for military assistance, as they always were. And the government had been sort of stand-offish on the question of whether we should get involved. This was 1949. And even before then, we had an OSS mission in there with Ho Chi Minh, which was very close to him. And they were bringing out a lot of good information, as well as they were actually helping Ho Chi Minh in the war against Japan.

But even so, as soon as the war was over, the anti-communist forces in Washington started mustering strength. The whole bit with Ho Chi Minh came to nothing in the end. The mission was withdrawn. And we sort of were taking a position of supporting Bao Dai

as the emperor, but not really getting involved. And General Marshall, the Secretary of State, didn't much want to be involved either.However, there came the development as to whether we—when we got formal requests for aid for Indochina—because it wasn't Vietnam then. There was a split in the Department between the Bureau for Far Eastern Affairs and Bureau for European Affairs. Europe, of course, wanted to give the French anything they wanted. And the Far East was adamantly opposed to becoming involved at all. After all, we were still smarting from the whole China debacle, where we knew we had a lot of lessons to learn. It was pretty uncertain whether we had to learn, really, most of them. Any of them!

So we just simply were not prepared to become involved in Vietnam, to which was added the fact that there was no Vietnamese experience in the Department. There was nobody who spoke Vietnamese. In fact, in the United States there was nobody who knew any Vietnamese. Of course, that would change over the years. But at this time, we literally didn't know what we would be getting into. But this didn't seem to bother Europe. You didn't have to know anything about Asia.

Q: When you say, "This didn't bother Europe," these were the people who were in the EUR Bureau. In the Department of State.

MELBY: Yes. That's right. After all, if you knew France and French, that was enough. You didn't have to bother knowing anything about Asia. After all, they were the lesser breed without the pale, you know.

Well, the squabbling finally reached the Secretary, who took the matter to the President for a decision. And as was usually the case in those days, FE lost. And Mr. Truman signed an executive order saying that the United States was prepared to aid the French in their war against the Viet Minh—it wasn't the Viet Cong then; it was the Viet Minh—and he instructed the Department to put together a joint State-Defense military mission to go out

there. Survey the situation, make recommendations as to the specific kinds of military aid that the French wanted and needed in that area.

In the end, I drew the assignment. I was pretty junior at this time. But, partly I got it, I guess, because of my China experience. They thought that might be helpful in analyzing what was going on in Vietnam. Partly it was that nobody who outranked me wanted to go at all, anyway. So that I went out as the chief of mission and my deputy was a lieutenant general of Marines. He was Bobby Erskine, which posed a few protocol problems in the beginning. Because the pentagon took a very dim view of a Foreign Service officer of my rank. I was class 3 at this time.

Q: Equivalent of a colonel.

MELBY: After I came back from there, I was promoted to class 2. I went up very fast in the Service, as a matter of fact.

We put together this mission. And I realized that—when we started right out as we left from San Diego—that I was going to have to have it out with the general and reach some sort of understanding. So we withdrew to our private compartment up front on the plane. We had our own plane. And Bobby and I battled it out and reached an understanding, and from then on, there was absolutely no problem. He and I became great friends and colleagues. Even in the troubled times, Erskine came to my support when I was having security problems. So the mission, from that standpoint, was a great success. It worked very well. When we arrived out there, it was ostensibly a military mission to Southeast Asia, but the real point was Vietnam. Let's face it, the whole thing was a cover. And we actually did go to every country in Southeast Asia, except Burma, which wouldn't let us in.

And, the job on the working level, I had a staff of about 20 officers with me, plus a couple from ECA and some people in the State Department. So it was a good big group. But at

that level, they worked with their French opposite numbers very well. And actually, in three weeks, we really had everything that we needed to have in the way of information.

One of the things that we found we had to do was that the quality of intelligence that we were getting out of the area was so poor that we simply had to do it all ourselves.

Q: But why was the quality poor?

MELBY: Because the intelligence officers there—Army, Navy, and so on—all the attach#s were incompetent.

Q: It was sort of a backwater to which we sent backwater people?

MELBY: That's right. And just one example, it was in Bangkok. I was trying to locate one of the dissident Kuomintang generals who had taken refuge in northern Thailand with a very sizable number of Kuomintang army troops. So I asked the military attach# where this man was and he said, “Well, he's up north now.” I then, later on, asked the Marine Corps attach#—who was also the Naval attach#—if he knew. And he said, “Oh, no, he's over here,” someplace else. And I asked a third attach#, and he gave me another answer. I said, “Well, that's fine. That's what I wanted to know.” Because I'd had lunch that same day with this particular general in Bangkok. But they didn't even know that. This was the kind of intelligence that we were getting out of the area.

And we then proceeded from Saigon, where we spent three weeks.

Q: Saigon? Rather than Hanoi?

MELBY: The French headquarters were in Saigon. Everything was located in Saigon. The governor general was there, the commanding general of the French forces. They were all based in Saigon.

I went to Hanoi, which was a very charming, kind of French provincial sort of city.

From Saigon, we then stopped off in the Philippines, en route. But we went back to the Philippines because we had a pretty active military program there. And then we went on to Singapore, where the British were very anxious that we make a contribution to their guerrilla warfare against the Chinese dissidents there in Malaysia.

The headquarters for the Malaysian Federation was in Singapore, when McDonald was the High Commissioner for Southeast Asia. But Washington wasn't disposed to do anything for Malaysia, because Malaysia was the biggest dollar-earner in the British commonwealth. Therefore, the British presumably had the dollar exchange to buy their own equipment for Malaysia. But we had a nice time in Singapore. And McDonald was a very cordial guy.

From there we went to Indonesia. And then back to Thailand. Thailand was a place where, unfortunately, we stayed too long. We sort of wore out our welcome a little bit. Ed Stanton was ambassador there, who disapproved of the mission, to begin with. We were just there too long. Not only was the embassy fed up with having us around, but even the Thais were beginning to get a little bored with us, too. We were there almost a month.

Q: What were you doing?

MELBY: It ended up, we were providing as much military hardware for the Thai Army and Navy and Air Force as we were for Vietnam.

Q: You were looking at the Thai requirements and sending recommendations? And seeing whether it made sense to continue it or not?

MELBY: Yes.

Q: How did the ambassador take this?

MELBY: He was opposed to it entirely.

Q: Was he opposed to our sending military equipment to Thailand? And your mission said yes, to do it?

MELBY: Yes.

Q: Why was the difference? What was the issue?

MELBY: The Pentagon decided that we were going to equip the Thai forces.

Q: Why didn't the ambassador want it? Usually ambassadors like to hand over things if they can.

MELBY: Ed Stanton was a China language officer. He had gone through the whole China bit, and he thought it was a waste of money and time. There wasn't any point in arming one faction in Thailand to fight another faction in another coup d'#tat, that we ought to keep our hands out of Thai politics.

Q: So there was not a matter of looking upon building this up as a bulwark against communism, as much as giving them weapons? You didn't feel that, without weapons, there was an immediate threat that might take over?

MELBY: Not an immediate threat in Thailand, no. The Thai armed services were a pretty competent bunch, incidentally. And the police, which had its own army, they were the most impressive military forces we saw in Southeast Asia.

Q: So you didn't feel that there was an imminent danger in Thailand. Were you under pressure from Washington to approve the sale of arms to Thailand, to keep a foot in the door? Was there a reason why?

MELBY: It was contingency aid, really. In case things went sour in Vietnam. And as it worked out over the years, there were big American bases in Thailand. About half of

southern Thailand was one huge American Air Force base. And an awful lot of secret operations, bombing raids, were conducted out of Thailand.

Q: So contingency actually paid off.

MELBY: From that standpoint, yes, if you thought the war in Vietnam was worthwhile. Of course, I didn't.

Q: Let's go to your report on Vietnam. What did you see?

MELBY: The working stiffs got along fine with their French counterparts. We had trouble at the top, between me and Don Heath, who was the minister.

Q: He was my ambassador for a little while in Saudi Arabia, a long time ago.

MELBY: Well, Don was new to Southeast Asia, but I must say, he was trying to learn Vietnamese, which nobody else in the embassy was doing. And the French high commissioner and the commanding general of the French forces. And we just didn't see eye to eye on what was going on. Because my whole reaction—and it didn't take more than a couple of weeks—was that we were getting ourselves involved in something that we were totally without expertise to handle. We didn't know what we would be getting into. We didn't have anybody who really knew anything about Vietnam or what it was.

Q: You weren't saying, “This is a lost situation.” The main thing is, we just don't know, and let's not go into something unless we know what it is.

MELBY: It isn't a question, “We don't know,” but that what we do know is, “We're going to lose.” Don Heath and I just disagreed because he'd been sort of taken into camp by the French. I made my report; I cabled it back to Washington—and you could still do this. I cleared it with him, and he filed his dissent with it. And he cleared it with me. This was the kind of situation that didn't last very long, you know, as we got into the McCarthy period. But officers still did trust each other. And I just said, “We're getting ourselves into a totally

untenable situation. It's all very well to say that this is step one. We go this far and no farther. Because it doesn't work that way. If step one doesn't work, then you've got to take step two. And it goes on and on. And once you become committed, there's no backing out, and we're just headed for disaster."

Q: Did you have a feeling, looking back on this with some objectivity, Heath had been ambassador before that in Bulgaria and had been kicked out of there. But anyway, he was a European hand more than not. You came out of, particularly your China experience, where you saw a very successful movement taking place. And I think all of us are traumatized by things that we have seen. Do you think that maybe it was because you were coming from two different perspectives of how things worked in the world? You saw that unless you had a very strong government, for instance, you saw that the communists had something going for them in Asia. And there wasn't much to stop them.

MELBY: The communists had something going for them because they had a nationalist appeal. They were first nationalists and second communists.

Yes. I was convinced that the French were going to lose, because they, too, never understood Asia or Asians. And they were conducting a positional warfare against a guerrilla army and they had no more chance of winning that than Chiang Kai-shek had at winning against the communists. Because you're dealing with a situation in which conventional warfare just simply doesn't work.

Don Heath, of course, I think he was just taken in by the French. Ed Gullion was there. He was Counselor. Ed and I were classmates in the Service. Although Ed didn't say very much, I happen to know from talks I had with him that he thought we were making a mistake in becoming involved, too. Ed would later change his mind on a lot of things. But he hadn't done so yet.

My recommendation back to the Department was, “Please pass this on. Ask the President to reconsider his decision to go ahead and help the French.”

Q: How about General Erskine?

MELBY: Erskine was of two minds. Being a Marine Corps general, force was always the answer. But on the other hand, Bobby was not without his insights. And he would say to me, “In the end, this has to be a political solution here. Anything we do militarily is only a holding operation. There has to be a political and economic solution to this whole question of Vietnam.” So Erskine was basically backing up my position.

Q: What happened when you made this report?

MELBY: What happened was, I asked that the President read my report and reconsider. But you have to remember the time and the context, because I never got an answer out of it. You've got to remember that this was the summer of 1950. And Washington was just overwhelmed with the Korean War.

Q: June 25, 1950 was the invasion of North Korea into South Korea. And of course, we were thinking them in terms of stopping the communists wherever they were on the march.

MELBY: Yes, but nobody was thinking of Vietnam one way or the other. Before the Korean invasion ever started, mind you. On Vietnam, the President had decided as far back as February. This was based on NSC-68, that we were going to rearm the world. So any recommendations that I made, they were noted and nothing happened.

Q: You were mentioning to me yesterday that you had also sent something in about our intelligence operations.

MELBY: Rusk, the Assistant Secretary for the Far East, had asked me on the side to do an evaluation of our intelligence operations in Southeast Asia and send the report to him,

because he'd been in intelligence on the Far East in the pentagon. Which I did. And it was a pretty strong statement that I made. Maybe I just stated it more strongly than it was, at least politically-wise. Because my comment was that the quality of our intelligence is so bad that it approaches malfeasance in office, and something had to be done.

And this, of course, though it was just for Rusk and Bill Lacey—who was head of the Bureau for Southeast Asian Affairs—eyes-alone for them, got circulated all over the government. It was a slip that happened in the code room someplace, I never knew just exactly where. And this is the way it came to “Beetle” Smith's attention. “Beetle” Smith was director of CIA. And “Beetle” was livid.

Finally one day, after I got back, Acheson called me in and said I'd better make an appointment to go over and see “Beetle” Smith and try to quiet him down because, “He's out to get you.” Which I did, and it didn't get me anywhere. “Beetle” Smith wasn't buying it.

Q: What was his reaction when you saw him?

MELBY: “What do you know about intelligence, young man? Who are you to criticize intelligence?” If there was any satisfaction in it, incidentally, it was that within three months of my return from Southeast Asia, every intelligence officer in the entire area was replaced, including all the CIA operators, too. There was a whole new crew sent out. Not only CIA, but all the attach#s were changed. So what it was worth, I don't know.

Q: Once again, I want to thank you very much for this. You were at interesting places at interesting times!

MELBY: Well, one of the little sidelights on the thing was, when I was over with “Beetle” Smith, Alan Dulles was over there. He was then Deputy Director of the CIA. He just sat in the corner and didn't say anything or participate in the conversation at all. He was just present.

The phone rang. And from the conversation, I could tell that the man who was calling Smith was the head of G-2, a major general, who was also livid. He'd seen the telegram on intelligence. And “Beetle” was trying to calm him down. He was saying, “Don't get excited now. We'll take care of it. We'll investigate this young man and find out what goes on.”

Q: Well, you were very much the fox in the hen house, at that particular point.

Again, I want to thank you.

End of interview